



2nd World Conference On Business, Economics And Management - WCBEM 2013

Organizational Communication Climate and Conflict Management: Communications Management in an Oil and Gas Company

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Abstract

Communication climate is of paramount importance in an organization as it contributes to the effectiveness and success of an organization. The communication climate of an organization may influence the atmosphere in the organization which either encourages or hinders horizontal, upward or downward communication among the employees. In organizations with defensive climates, employees have the tendency to abstain from communicating their *needs*, as they become very cautious in making statements, and may have low level of motivation. On the other hand, organizations with supportive environments encourage active participation, healthy exchange of information and constructive conflict resolution. Instilling collaborative communication climate in an organization however requires effective management of conflicts. This paper reports a study conducted in a high risk work environment of an oil and gas company, in which the personnel have to work with volatile chemicals and heavy machines. The communicative behaviors in such hazardous environments are not to be taken lightly as communication errors could lead to fatal incidences. The study thus investigates the impact of communication conflict strategies used by the personnel on the overall organizational communication climate in a high-risk workplace environment. A set of questionnaires were administered to employees at all levels in the organization working at the administrative office and at the gas plant. One hundred and twenty five employees responded to the questionnaire, which attributed to more than fifty percent of the total population. The findings discuss the impact of various communicative strategies used in conflict management on the organizational communication climate. The overall findings suggest that conflicts management is related to the roles the personnel play in the organization. In assuming the leadership role, the top management's approach to conflicts include confrontational and compromise, instead of non-confrontation and control, which have a degree of impact on the communication supportive climate. The executives, technical staff, non-technical staff have different approaches in conflict management strategies.

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Selection and peer review under responsibility of Organizing Committee of BEM 2013.

Keywords: Communication climate, conflict management, Organizational Communication

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1. Introduction

Organizational climate has been identified as a critical component between the members of an organization (Guzley, 1992). Organizational communication climate, which has been deliberated separately from organizational climate in the literature, has increasingly become one of the most important factors in creating an effective organization (Zaremba, 2003). Communication climate has been treated separately from organizational climate and separate from other climates in the organization, such as motivational climate or achievement climate (Poole, 1985). The Management has primary responsibility for the establishment of the communication climate of the organization.

“Climate” can be defined as the “relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of the organization that (a) is experienced by its members, (b) influences their behavior, and (c) can be described in term of values of a particular set of characteristics (or attributes) of the environment” (Taguiri, 1968:27). The climate thus sets the atmosphere in the organization that either encourages or discourages communication. Organizations with supportive environments encourage worker participation, free and open exchange of information, and constructive conflict resolution. In organizations with defensive climates, employees keep their views to themselves, make only guarded statements and suffer from reduced morale. Thus effective communication is important for the establishment of a collaborative communication climate. However, management of controversy and divergent thoughts as part of the communication climate forms a crucial task to be achieved in an organization.

Effective communication skills can be the most useful tool in dealing with organizational and personal conflicts. Fischer and Koue (1991) argued that “communication is inherent in almost any organizational conflict” (p.145). Conflict is “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals” (Miller, 2006:194). The basis of conflicts therefore lies in the perception of incompatibility regarding various issues in the organizations, the interdependent behaviors of organizational members, and the role of interaction that allows expression of incompatibility. This highlights the importance of communication in the study of conflict.

The study is contextualized within an oil and gas company with a highly hazardous work environment. Employees in the gas plant work with safety as their job priority. Failure in effective communication could be fatal. Literature however addresses the concern that the technical leaders today lack management training (Vieth & Smith, 2008) and opening up to two-way communication poses a big change to an engineer when assuming managerial role (Mhaskar, 2010). As engineers are trained to be task-oriented and highly technical, training such employees people skills i.e. communication skills, can be challenging especially when managing conflicts amongst the employees, and across the departments, to maintain supportive climate. The purpose of this study therefore is to explore the relationship between organizational communication climate and communication conflict in an oil and gas company. As the organization is made up personnel from of various levels and job expertise, the analysis will be conducted in relation to the different levels of the personnel i.e. Management, Executives, Non-executives, and Technical staff.

2. Literature Review

Organizational communication climate functions as a link between individual employees and the organization (Falcione, Sussman & Herden, 1987). The overall climate would give a hint of its employees’ beliefs and attitudes towards the organization. It conceptually consists of employees’ perceptions of the information flow and the climate in which the communication occurs (Pace, 1983: 126). Studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between the communication climate in the organization to the level of commitment of the employees to the organization (e.g. Trombetta and Rogers, 1988). Welsch and LaVan (1981) argued that quality of information, accuracy and communication flow are all related to commitment.

Communication climate is also seen in two perspectives, either in “open or close climate”. Information flows freely in an open climate but is blocked in a close communication climate. According to Buchholz (2001), workers feel free to make voice complaints, express opinions and give suggestions to their supervisors and superiors through an open climate. Several studies indicate that there is an increased trust in management when both of parties, the top management and its employees, are open to views in decision makings (Mishra & Morrissey, 1990; McCauley & Kuhnert, 1992; Meznor & Nigh, 1995). Studies indicate that open communication enhances productivity as well as profitability toward an organization (Rosenberg & Rosestein, 1980). Positive communication amplifies identification which serves employees’ self enhancement in the organization (Ale Smidts et.al, 2000).

To date, various instruments have been used to measure organizational climate. Communication Climate Scale is developed by Dennis (1974) and stated in O’Connel (1979) were used by Guzley (1992) to measure communication climate with four dimensions selected. Ale Smidts et.al (2000) had measured communication climate through existing instruments (Alutto & Vredendourgh, 1977; Dennis, 1975; Down & Hazen, 1977; Falcione et al., 1987) with three dimensions.

Studies also indicate that working in an organization requires team work and conflict is inevitable as it is a social phenomenon (Pondy, 1967). Ma, Lee and Yu (2008) developed a dual model in conflicts management styles that either focus on self or concern for others. These two dimensions are further divided into avoiding, accommodating, competing, collaborative and compromising – the different styles adopted by individuals in handling conflicts.

Literature states that conflicts within organizations can be viewed from two different perspectives as they can either be seen as normative or dynamic (Millar, Rogers and Bavelas, 1984). Normative models view conflicts as negative and require attention to resolve while dynamic models see conflicts as positive and in fact advantageous to the organizations. Jameson (1999) argued that whether conflicts are seen as negative or positive depends on the traits and attributes, the objectives and strategies in handling the conflicts. There are various ways in managing conflicts suggested in the literature. Rahim et al. (1992) categorized conflict management styles into five which are integrating (win-win), obliging (lose-win), dominating (win-lose), avoiding (lose-lose) and compromising (no win-no lose). Gross and Guerrero (2000) argue that an individual is perceived as competent in an organization should he be able to manage conflicts in the most appropriate and effective manner. The styles adopted by the individuals in managing conflicts are “patterned responses, or clusters of behavior, that people use in conflict” through communication strategies (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001: 130). Putnam and Wilson (1982) goes a step further by measuring the conflict management styles through the Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI). The instrument focuses on communicative behaviors with the following underlying assumptions: “conflict strategies are those communicative behaviors, both verbal and non-verbal, that provide a means for handling conflict...[and the use of]...a particular conflict strategy [that] is largely governed by situational rather than personality constraints” (Putnam and Wilson, 1982: 633).

In relation to the success and performance of an organization, the reliance is very much dependent on the effective use of integrated resources like people, technology and processes especially in creating business values (Weijermars, 2007). Gas plants require technical experts with various differing backgrounds that consistently need bridging of technical knowledge. Disparity in technical knowledge could lead to miscommunications and may escalate to conflicts that could be detrimental to social environment. Van de Vliert, (1998) on a similar grounds argued that the social climate (especially of personnel from various backgrounds and expert areas) at an organization could build conflict that could be destructive to organizations. It is hence imperative to examine the capabilities and strategies used by the personnel in handling conflicts. Open communication climate can decrease uncertainty where it provides the personnel as interactants with some level of predictability (Bercerra & Gupta, 2003). Moreover, communication openness in such climate is a key component in decreasing any detrimental effect of conflict on trust (Lewicki and Bunker, 1995). Communication therefore is seen as vital to building trust within an organization (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003; Aubert and Kelsey, 2003) resulting in reduced conflicts and increased positive

organizational climate. This study examines the impact of communication conflict strategies used by the personnel of an oil and gas company on the overall organizational communication climate.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted in an oil and gas company in Malaysia. The organization is located in Terengganu. Its main business portfolio is divided into four major divisions: Plant Operations, Transmission Operations, Centralized Utility Facilities and Technical & Facilities Development. The first two are directly related, the former responsible for processing the gas piped from the offshore fields while the latter is responsible for transporting the processed gas via the Peninsular Gas Utilization (PGU) pipeline network to customers nationwide. The Centralized Utility Facilities division supports the gas value chain by supplying industrial utilities to the various petrochemical plants. The Technical & Facilities Development handles technical services in engineering and project management to their subsidiaries. All of the departments consist of personnel of various levels from the non-executive to the managerial levels and from non-technical personnel to experts in the technical areas. The results of the study provide an insight into the various conflict communication strategies adopted by engineers, technical staff and non-technical staff in the organization. One hundred fifty questionnaires were distributed to the personnel in the company. The return rate of the questionnaire was more than eighty percent as one hundred twenty five responded to the questionnaires. The respondents comprise of managers, administrative executives, engineers, technical staff and non-executives.

The questionnaire is divided into three parts which are organizational communication climate, conflict management and demography section. *The Organizational Communication Climate Survey (OCCS)* measures communication climate (see Akinsaya and Momoh, 2012). The scores obtained from the instrument will either indicate a defensive climate or a supportive one. The instrument consists of six sub-dimensions: description vs. evaluation, problem-orientation vs. control, spontaneity vs. strategy, empathy vs. neutrality, equality vs. superiority, and provisionalism vs. certainty. A well-established instrument, *Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI)* (Putnam and Wilson, 1982), was employed to form the first part of the study. The instrument is selected because of its highly established reliability using Cronbach's Alpha (see Mhaskar, 2010), it focuses on communication and the underlying assumption that conflicts are highly situational.

The focus of the instrument is in line with the purpose of this study which also seeks to explore the relationship between communication conflict strategies and communication climate in an organization. The reliability of the instrument is well established and has been consistently high as reported in many other studies in the literature. Wilson and Waltman (1988) reported alpha coefficients ranging from .70 to .93 for the sub-scales. The content validity established confirms the communication strategies used to manage organizational conflict included in the questionnaire are adequate. It contains 30 items and respondents indicate on a 5-point Likert scale on the frequency of using a particular strategy. The sub-scales include: non-confrontation strategies, solution-oriented strategies (which contain collaboration and compromise) and control strategies. The demography section prompts responses on the respondents' background for example their positions, gender, age and department.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Communication Behavior in Resolving Conflicts

The sub-dimensions of OCCI include non-confrontation strategies, solution-oriented strategies (which contain confrontation and compromise) and control strategies. Table 1 denotes the mean scores, standard deviation, and reliability coefficient of *Organizational Communication Conflict Dimension*. As indicated in the table below the reliability values are acceptably high (0.80-0.83). The high value of standard deviation (see Table 1 for the standard deviation values) indicates how spread out the data is. In the case of test results, examiners would usually want small value of standard deviation as high scores are desired. However in rating scale, a wide spread is preferred to indicate the questionnaires cover the range of group in the organization.

Table 1: Mean scores, standard deviation, and reliability coefficient of *Organizational Communication Conflict Dimension*

Dimensions	Overall Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Reliability Coefficient (α)
Non-confrontation strategies	2.97	4.51	0.80
Solution-Oriented Strategies-Confrontation	3.40	3.64	0.82
Solution-Oriented strategies-Compromise	3.37	3.68	0.83
Control Strategies	2.98	3.87	0.80

*The possible range of scores is from 1 to 5

a High score indicates inclination towards non-confrontation strategies

b High score implies high level of confrontation as part of solution-oriented strategies

c High score implies high use of compromise as part of solution-oriented strategies

d High score illustrates high usage of control strategies

The findings generally show that most of the staff have considerably lower inclination towards non-confrontation strategies in resolving conflict (2.97). Non-confrontation strategies are characterized by a number of items in its measurement. Non-confrontation is not the preferred strategies as the staff seldom avoid their colleagues to discuss disagreements, keep silent about their views in order to avoid disagreements and withdraw when others confront about controversial issues. The staff members sometimes make attempts to reduce disagreements by making them seem insignificant and avoid disagreements when they arise. The findings indicate that more than often, the staff would try to strike a balance between using confrontation (3.40) and compromise (3.37) in the strategies to resolve conflicts. They are neither particularly strong in adopting confrontation nor compromise as solution-oriented strategies. They hence only at times suggest solutions which combine a variety of viewpoints, integrate arguments into a new solution, offer creative solutions when discussing disagreements and work together to create solutions to disagreements.

The members of the organization are not particularly inclined towards using compromise as their strategy to resolve conflicts. A number of items were included in the questionnaire to measure if the respondents have the tendency to opt for such strategy. For example, only sometimes would they be willing to consider others' ideas if others are willing to accept their viewpoints, seldom go 50-50 to reach a settlement with their colleagues, sometimes give in if others meet half way when discussing issues, sometimes meet others at a mid-point, and sometimes willing to compromise to reach solutions in a disagreement. The organization does not generally frequently practice high usage of control strategies in resolving conflicts. They however do voice their opinion when in disagreement with other staff and sometimes they do assert opinions forcefully. The findings also suggest that the personnel of the organization very seldom choose to dominate arguments until others understand their position, argue insistently for their viewpoints, insist their stand be accepted during a disagreement with superiors or stand firm in expressing their viewpoints during a disagreement with others.

4.2 Organizational Communication Climate at the Organizational Level

The reliability analysis of the questionnaire revealed high values of Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients (α) indicating that the scales used are consistent in measuring the dimensions (see Table 2). The principal sub-scales for OCCS hence remain description vs. evaluation, problem-orientation vs. control, spontaneity vs. strategy, empathy vs. neutrality, equality vs. superiority, and provisionalism vs. certainty. The overall communication climate of the organization indicates supportive communication climate in the organization. The respondents were asked to respond to the items on their perceptions of the others' behavior in the organization.

Table 2: Mean scores, standard deviation, and reliability coefficient of Organizational Communication Climate Dimension

Dimensions	Overall Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Reliability Coefficient (α)
Description vs. Evaluation	3.41	2.67	0.76
Problem-orientation vs. Control	3.56	2.57	0.75
Spontaneity vs. Strategy	3.68	2.76	0.86
Empathy vs. Neutrality	3.69	2.83	0.87
Equality vs. Superiority	3.80	2.81	0.88
Provisionalism vs. Certainty	3.71	2.73	0.86

**The possible range of scores is from 1 to 5*

a High score indicates high level of description in the communication climate

b High score implies high level of problem-orientation in the communication climate

c High score illustrates high level of spontaneity in the communication climate

d High score shows empathy in the communication climate

e. High score indicates equality in the communication climate

f. High score shows high level of provisionalism in the communication climate

The moderately high level of descriptive vs. evaluative communication climate (3.41) shows that personnel generally are perceived as always checking and understanding what is being articulated by their fellow colleagues. Such climate exists in the organization as most the respondents often verbally describe the feelings other members try to express and restate for clarification what another person has said before making their own points. They say clearly say up front what their expectations are and provide objective feedback without being evaluative. The workforce has a tendency in using problem-orientation rather than control. Instead of deciding what to do, they seek input from others and share the responsibility in decision-making. They usually ask the other members to clarify what have been said for better understanding. They directly face disagreements and try to understand the underlying differences in making decisions. Generally, the organization has moderately high level of spontaneity in responding to problems which contributes to the supportive climate of the organization. Such spontaneity reveals genuine motives rather than appearing as manipulative. The people in the organization are perceived as very often share feelings in clear and non-threatening ways, provide support and encouragement in a discussion in order to explore an issue in depth, help explore an issue in depth without trying to push their ideas and say clearly upfront what their expectations are. The level of empathy is moderately high in the communication climate of the organization acknowledging others' feelings (Gibb, 1999). They listen to others and try to understand their viewpoints very often verbally describe the feelings other members try to express and care about another person as a person when talking. Communication behaviors such as empathy can create a cycle of supportiveness amongst the staff in the organization. Neutrality on the other hand indicates indifferent to others' feelings. Communicative behaviors displaying mutual trust and openness in accepting others' views could enhance supportive communication climate in an organization (Gibbs, 1999). The considerably high mean score indicates equality in the communication climate of the organization instead of superiority. They ask other members clarify what they have said for better understanding, share feelings in clear and non-threatening ways, provide support and encouragement in a discussion in order to explore an issue in depth and give others a chance to talk to contribute to a discussion. Communicating provisionally, is another supportive behavior, that demonstrates open-mindedness and willingness to accept others' ideas (Gibb, 1999). The personnel listen to others and try to understand their viewpoints give others a chance to talk to contribute to a discussion, help explore an issue in depth without trying to push their ideas and face any kind of disagreements directly and try to understand the underlying differences. The combination of communicating provisionally, describing concerns, using a problem orientation in decision-making, spontaneity in problem-solving with genuine motives, expressing empathy, and emphasizing equality creates a supportive communication climate in the organization.

In analysing perception towards communication climate by the different level of personnel, the top management group is found to have a different view of the overall communication climate in the organization. In contrast to the other groups, they find that the overall climate as defensive rather than supportive where the items under the scale are evaluative, controlled, strategy, neutral instead of empathy, superior and with certainty. The evaluative climate perceived by the management executives indicates the people in their organization almost seldom verbally describe the feelings of others trying to express, restate for clarification before making their points, say clearly upfront what their expectations are and provide objective feedback without being evaluative. The communication climate is controlled where the people in the organization are seen as almost seldom ask others to repeat what they have said for better understanding and seldom face disagreements directly to understand the underlying differences. The Management team see the climate as strategic rather than spontaneous where the people in the organization are seen as seldom share feelings in clear and non-threatening ways, seldom provide support and encouragement in a discussion to explore an issue in depth, and help explore an issue in depth without trying to push their ideas. The management executives also find that the climate as neutral rather than empathetic where the people are seen as seldom listen to others to understand their viewpoints or seldom care about a person when the person is talking. The climate is also seen as certain rather than provisional as the people are perceived as seldom give others a chance to talk to contribute to a discussion, help explore an issue in depth without pushing their ideas and try to face disagreements directly to understand underlying differences.

4.3 The Impact of Organizational Communication Conflict Strategies on Organizational Communication Climate

4.3.1 Organizational level

The findings generally indicate a positive correlation between the communication strategies in resolving conflicts and the overall communication climate in the organization (see Table 3). Pearson correlations indicate that there are significant relationships between all the variables of the two dimensions. Specifically, the findings indicate a moderate positive relationship between non-confrontation strategies and Description vs Evaluation ($r = 0.400$, $p < 0.01$). However comparatively weaker relationships are indicated between non-confrontation strategies and Problem-orientation vs Control ($r = 0.380$, $p < 0.01$), Spontaneity vs Strategy ($r = 0.353$, $p < 0.01$), Empathy vs Neutrality ($r = 0.325$, $p < 0.01$), Equality vs Superiority ($r = 0.346$, $p < 0.01$) and Provisional vs Certainty ($r = 0.308$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3: Relationship between Communication Conflict Strategies and Communication Climate

Dimensions	Evaluation vs. Description	Control vs. Problem-orientation	Strategy vs. Spontaneity	Neutrality vs. Empathy	Superiority vs. Equality	Certainty vs. Provisionalism
Non-confrontation strategies	.400(**) .000	.380(**) .000	.353(**) .000	.325(**) .000	.346(**) .000	.308(**) .001
Solution-oriented strategies-Confrontation	.597(**) .000	.557 (**) .000	.620(**) .000	.584(**) .000	.577(**) .000	.595(**) .000
Solution-oriented strategies – Compromise	.547(**) .000	.495(**) .000	.498(**) .000	.476(**) .000	.489(**) .000	.459(**) .000
Control strategies	.522(**) .000	.462(**) .000	.463(**) .000	.390(**) .000	.386(**) .000	.461(**) .000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note: The higher the tendency for the conflict strategy the higher the supportive climate is.

There are strong relationships between solution-oriented strategies confrontation and Description vs Evaluation ($r = 0.597$, $p < 0.01$), Problem-orientation vs Control ($r = 0.557$, $p < 0.01$), Spontaneity vs Strategy ($r = 0.620$, $p < 0.01$), Empathy vs Neutrality ($r = 0.584$, $p < 0.01$), Equality vs Superiority ($r = 0.577$, $p < 0.01$) and Provision vs Certainty ($r = 0.595$, $p < 0.01$). Pearson correlations also indicate that there are strong relationships between solution-oriented strategies-compromise and Description vs Evaluation ($r = 0.547$, $p < 0.01$), whereas a moderate relationship with Problem-orientation vs Control ($r = 0.495$, $p < 0.01$), Spontaneity vs Strategy ($r = 0.498$, $p < 0.01$), Empathy vs Neutrality ($r = 0.476$, $p < 0.01$), Equality vs Superiority ($r = 0.489$, $p < 0.01$) and Provision vs Certainty ($r = 0.459$, $p < 0.01$).

The findings indicate strong relationships between control strategies and Description vs Evaluation ($r = 0.522$, $p < 0.01$), whereas a moderate relationship with Problem-orientation vs Control ($r = 0.462$, $p < 0.01$), Spontaneity vs Strategy ($r = 0.463$, $p < 0.01$), Empathy vs Neutrality ($r = 0.390$, $p < 0.01$), Equality vs Superiority ($r = 0.386$, $p < 0.01$) and Provision vs Certainty ($r = 0.461$, $p < 0.01$). The correlation analysis at the overall organizational level shows that the higher the usage of non-confrontation strategies is, more supportive the communication climate of the organization is. Hence the current communication strategies adapted by members of this organization in resolving conflicts seem to be appropriate and suitable as the findings indicate a moderately high level of positive supportive climate.

4.3.2 By organizational levels

4.3.2.1 Technical non-executives

A deeper analysis however paints a different picture of the relationship between the strategies in resolving conflict and its impact on the communication climate involving the technical non-executives in the plant of the oil and gas company. The findings show that there is no significant relationship between non-confrontation strategies and the perceived organizational communication climate (see Table 4). There are however positive relationships between confrontational and control strategies in maintaining overall supportive communication climate. Compromise would only work to maintain descriptive working climate instead of evaluative and maintain high empathy level in the organization.

Table 4: Relationship between Communication Conflict Strategies and Communication Climate – Non-executive Technical Personnel

Dimensions	Evaluation vs. Description	Control vs. Problem-orientation	Strategy vs. Spontaneity	Neutrality vs. Empathy	Superiority vs. Equality	Certainty vs. Provisionalism
Non-confrontation strategies	.171 .148	.154 .194	.113 .342	.047 .693	.123 .305	.033 .786
Solution-oriented strategies- Confrontation	.428(**) .000	.371 (**) .001	.385(**) .001	.418(**) .000	.338(**) .003	.371(**) .001
Solution-oriented strategies – Compromise	.311(**) .007	.206(**) .078	.203 .085	.238(*) .041	.188 .112	.163 .172
Control strategies	.480(**) .000	.400(**) .000	.456(**) .000	.384(**) .000	.369(**) .000	.433(**) .000

Note: The higher the tendency for the conflict strategy the higher the supportive climate is

Descriptive analysis shows that the technical non-executives are also found to only sometimes use the non-confrontation strategies (3.00) in resolving conflicts that they face at the plant, which does not have any impact on the perceived climate of the workplace. Even though there is significant relationship between the control strategy and the overall supportive climate, the findings indicate that the technical non-executives only sometimes use such

approach (3.00). Based on the correlation Pearson Product Moment analysis, adopting the control strategies in such volatile work environment would however be able to maintain supportive communication climate ($r=0.48$; $r=0.40$; $r=0.46$; $r=0.38$; $r=0.37$; $r=0.43$). The technical staff members seem to slightly interchangeably shift in adopting the confrontation (3.42) and compromise approaches in resolving conflicts (3.37). The confrontation strategies approach however has a slightly stronger impact in maintaining the supportive climate at the workplace ($r=0.43$; $r=0.37$; $r=0.39$; $r=0.42$; $r=0.34$; $r=0.37$). On the contrary, even though there is a positive relationship between control strategies in maintaining a supportive communication climate at the workplace for the technical non-executives, such relationship work only partially for the non-technical non-executives like clerks and administrative workers (see Table 5.)

Table 5: Relationship between Communication Conflict Strategies and Communication Climate – Non-executive Non-technical Personnel

Dimensions	Evaluation vs. Description	Control vs. Problem-orientation	Strategy vs. Spontaneity	Neutrality vs. Empathy	Superiority vs. Equality	Certainty vs. Provisionalism
Non-confrontation strategies	.658(**) .000	.631(**) .001	.608(**) .002	.558(**) .005	.567(**) .004	.578(**) .003
Solution-oriented strategies- Confrontation	.738(**) .000	.689(**) .000	.806(**) .000	.720(**) .000	.780(**) .000	.755(**) .000
Solution-oriented strategies – Compromise	.733(**) .000	.696(**) .000	.709(**) .000	.639(**) .001	.707(**) .000	.650(**) .001
Control strategies	.499(*) .013	.453(*) .026	.410(*) .047	.320 .128	.344 .100	.384 .064

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Note: The higher the tendency for the conflict **strategy the more supportive the climate is**

4.3.2.2 Non-technical non-executives

In a descriptive analysis, the non-technical non-executives however are found seldom using the control approach in resolving conflicts (2.90). This group of staff however interchangeably uses non-confrontation (3.12), confrontation (3.31) and compromise (3.43), which do have a degree of impact in maintaining supportive communication climate.

4.3.2.3 Executive Level

Similar to the technical non-executive group, there is no significant relationship between the non-confrontational strategies and the communication climate (see Table 6). Descriptive analysis also shows that the executives seldom use non-confrontational approach in resolving conflicts (2.70). They interchangeably use confrontational (3.51), compromise (3.33) or control (3.13) strategies in resolving conflicts, which have strong relationship in maintaining supportive climate.

Table 6: Relationship between Communication Conflict Strategies and Communication Climate – Executive level

Dimensions	Evaluation vs. Description	Control vs. Problem-orientation	Strategy vs. Spontaneity	Neutrality vs. Empathy	Superiority vs. Equality	Certainty vs. Provisionalism
Non-confrontation strategies	.400 .080	.349 .131	.362 .117	.401 .080	.288 .217	.325 .162

Solution-oriented strategies- Confrontation	.721(**) .000	.721(**) .000	.840(**) .000	.791(**) .000	.802(**) .000	.858(**) .000
Solution-oriented strategies – Compromise	.737(**) .000	.740(**) .000	.788(**) .000	.716(**) .001	.740(**) .000	.745(**) .001
Control strategies	.585(**) .007	.516(*) .020	.540(*) .014	.499(*) .025	.395 .085	.565(**) .009

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Note: The higher the tendency for the conflict strategy the **more supportive the climate is**.

4.3.2.4 The Management Level

The findings suggest that there is less number of strategies that have significant impact on the overall communication climate as perceived by the management level (see Table 7). There is no significant relationship between non-confrontation or control strategies and the communication climate. There is however a significantly strong positive relationship between confrontation and the organizational communication climate as perceived by the top management of the oil and gas company under study. Different from the executives who perceive integrated approach to managing conflicts through compromise, confrontational and control strategies would have an impact in maintaining supportive communication climate, the management's approach is however only limited to confrontational and compromise.

Table 7: Relationship between Communication Conflict Strategies and Communication Climate – Management level

Dimensions	Evaluation vs. Description	Control vs. Problem- orientation	Strategy vs. Spontaneity	Neutrality vs. Empathy	Superiority vs. Equality	Certainty vs. Provisionalism
Non-confrontation strategies	.874 .126	.849 .151	.834 .166	.874 .126	.856 .144	.812 .188
Solution-oriented strategies- Confrontation	.999(**) .001	.995(**) .005	.999(**) .001	.999(**) .001	.986(*) .014	.994(**) .006
Solution-oriented strategies – Compromise	.978(*) .022	.980(*) .020	.961(*) .039	.978(*) .022	.991(**) .009	.933(**) .067
Control strategies	.948 .052	.931 .069	.921 .079	.948 .052	.934 .066	.903 .097

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note: The higher the tendency for the conflict strategy the more supportive the climate is

There is also a strong relationship between compromise and all the variables under communication climate except for the element of provisionalism. The management team of the organization very seldom uses non-confrontation (2.35) and control (2.50) strategies, which the findings show that they do not have any impact on the communication climate. They however sometimes use either compromise or confrontational strategies as ways to resolve conflicts which have direct positive relationship with the communication climate.

5. Discussion

The findings generally indicate that the individuals in the organization take into consideration both the situation and the other party and not only his or her preferred styles. These findings also suggest that the organization practices both open and close climates when deemed appropriate to the situation present during the said communicative activity.

A majority of the respondents seem to have a high level of empathy and would strike a balance between using confrontation and compromise in the strategies to resolve conflicts. The personnel hence adopt integrating conflict management styles in managing conflicts. Such strategies are appropriate to the overall work environment as the findings suggest a positive impact on supportive communication climate at the workplace. The supportive environment, contrary to the defensive communication climate, would minimize the risk of personnel feeling defensive especially if they observe that there are communicative behaviors signaling that they are under attack (see Gibb, 1999). Such feeling amongst the personnel could be a hindrance as it intensifies the need for self-protection amongst the employees and increases uneasiness and suspicious feelings. Hence instead of a nagging feeling that someone is judging them, the colleagues are more inclined towards describing their concerns. In instances as such, it is evident that an open climate is at play. Such display of concerns by the personnel is in line with Buchholz's (2001) research on open climate, which similarly suggests that when workers express their grievances, perspectives as well as provide propositions to their supervisors or superiors. Such positive communication climate is essentially crucial to the success of the organization as studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between the communication climate in the organization and the level of commitment of the employees to the organization (e.g. Trombetta and Rogers, 1988).

Even though the overall workforce generally adopts an integrated strategy between compromise and confrontation, the technical engineering group of staff however prefer confrontational and control strategies. As most technical staff work in the plant and deal with hazardous conditions and volatile chemicals, they need to prioritize safety, hence downplaying the strategies of compromise. These findings are in support of Putnam's and Wilson's (1982) assertion that situations in which participants are engaged in would drive conflict management styles instead of their individual personalities. The contexts determine the roles an individual plays that reflect what is considered as an acceptable behavior and might not work in other contexts (Infante *et al.*, 1994). Such strategies are perceived as impactful to maintaining the supportive climate in the plant even though such strategies are strongly discouraged in managing people. While confrontational and control strategies may be perceived as damaging communicative strategies, in the case of the technical engineering group, it is deemed as a necessary measure within this group, given the dangerous work environment and situation the personnel are situated within. The presence of an open climate is once again evident.

The top management of organization however views that the organization generally has a defensive climate in contradiction to all other groups in the organization. Such climate is characterized by the feeling of being constantly evaluated, controlled and less empathy by the surrounding people. The findings are in support of McKinsey's survey which shows that a large number of top level executives are usually not satisfied with their performance especially when it comes to people skills (see Eich, 2012), which explains the feeling of being constantly judged. Such findings are also in line with the Leader Member Exchange Theory by Graen, Novak & Sommerkamp (1982) which argues that the way superiors communicate is different from subordinates. Unlike the other sub-groups in the organization, the management team in the organization has less number of strategies that are perceived as impactful to creating a supportive communication climate. The executives for example view that their integrated approach to managing conflicts through compromise, confrontational and control strategies would have an impact in maintaining supportive communication climate. The top management's approach is however only limited to confrontational and compromise, perceived as having a degree of impact on the communication supportive climate.

6. Conclusion

Studies on organizational communication involve two distinctive conceptual entities which are organization and communication. To understand communication within an organization requires an understanding on how communication processes influence the organizational climate and how communication is influenced by the conflicts managed by the members. The overall findings suggest that conflicts management is also related to the roles the personnel play in the organization. The management, executives and technical –non-executives feel that by adopting non-confrontational strategies will not help maintain supportive climate. On the other hand, the non-technical non-executive feel that by adopting non-confrontation strategies in managing conflicts could help maintain supportive climate. This could also be due to their role in the organization that is largely to support the superiors and also the technical staff. Non-confrontation strategies are perceived as not having an impact on the climate as seen by three sub-groups of management, executives and technical–non-executives. The different strategies adopted by the different groups of personnel in accordance to their role and situation at the workplace, suggests that conflicts in different contexts need to be further examined on when, with whom and on what purpose do the different conflict management styles are used to increase supportive communication climate at the work place. The study however focused on the overall communication networks, rather than on vertical or horizontal communication. The importance of other perspectives of organizational communication climate however cannot be overlooked.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to express our gratitude to the management of Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS for providing the research grant through Short-term Internal Funding to conduct the study. Our appreciation also goes to the oil and gas companies involved in the study and all of the respondents who had taken part during the data collection.

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